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Honduran Death Squad Alleged

Former Sergeant Says Army Group Tortured, Killed Leftists

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A member of an intelligence unit of the Honduran Army who recently fled the country says the unit committed kidnappings, torture and murders of leftist Hondurans and other Central Americans.

The former sergeant, Florencio Caballero, said the unit, known as Battalion 316, was trained and advised on intelligence matters by Americans but that the Hondurans disregarded American advice about not using physical torture to elicit information from prisoners.

Both Caballero and a former prisoner interviewed in Mexico said, however, that men they believed to be Americans seemed to be aware of the abuses and did not stop them.

Caballero, 29, said he served in military intelligence units from 1979 until 1984 and was trained by Americans and other foreigners in interrogation techniques. Americas Watch, a human rights monitoring group, arranged for Caballero to be interviewed in Toronto.

Caballero said the American advisers did not participate in interrogations or torture, but did advise the secret unit on whom to put under surveillance and what questions to ask those who had been detained. Caballero said the American advisers tried to persuade the Hondurans to use psychological pressures, rather than physical torture, but Honduran commanders preferred to continue using violent methods.

At the time of the alleged abuses described by Caballero, the United States was pressuring Honduras to disband what Washington called a support network of Central American leftists for guerrillas fighting to overthrow the U.S.-backed government in neighboring El Salvador.

A State Department spokesman declined to comment on Caballero's account.

The former sergeant's charges about the activities of Battalion 316 and its predecessor, the Directorate of Special Investigations, are consistent with other reports by a former Honduran officer and by Honduran and international human rights groups during the tenure of Gustavo Alvarez Martinez as head of the national police and later chief of staff of the armed forces. Alvarez, who was reputedly the most powerful man in Honduras in the

early 1980s, was removed by other officers in 1984 and went into exile.

Caballero is the first member of the unit to describe its activities publicly. His account was confirmed in part by a woman, Ines Murillo, who had been detained by the unit.

Alvarez could not be reached to comment on the allegations.

A Honduran human rights activist and Americas Watch said Battalion 316 is still functioning, but it has not been directly linked to any new abuses. In a report to be released May 7, Americas Watch states that "human rights monitors . . . believe the unit [Battalion 316] still carries out clandestine activities typical of death squads."

The number of suspicious disappearances dropped substantially after Alvarez was deposed, but rights groups have reported recent bombings, threats and a few deaths.

In two lengthy interviews, Caballero said he believed Battalion 316 was directed by Alvarez. He said it kidnaped suspected leftists, took them to secret detention centers, tortured them and eventually killed most of them. Caballero said he was involved in kidnaping "six or seven" persons, including German Perez Aleman, a Salvadoran union official, and Felix Martinez, a leftist Honduran professor. He said both were killed.

As an example of the methods used by Battalion 316, Caballero said he saw other soldiers tie an inner tube around Perez Aleman's face until he fainted. He said the prisoner also was submerged in water with his hands and feet bound.

Ines Murillo, the former detainee, gave a description in a separate interview of her experiences that coincided in many details with Caballero's account.

According to Amnesty International's 1986 annual report, Murillo was held from March 1983 until July 1984, much of that time incommunicado. In a recent interview in Mexico City, Murillo, who was a student activist who worked with peasant groups, said she was seized in Choloma in northeastern Honduras.

Murillo said that during the early stages of her detention she was manacled naked, suspended in the air and suffered "sexual abuses" and electric shocks. She said that later, in a secret military installation near Tegucigalpa, she underwent "psychological torture" and was doused

with ice water so she could not sleep. At that time, she said, a foreign man whom other prisoners and her Honduran captors identified as "Mr. Mike" visited the clandestine jail often.

Caballero said "Mr. Mike" was the name used by an American who worked at the U.S. Embassy and supervised the activities of Battalion 316.

Murillo added that when "Mr. Mike" came to visit the detention center, she was allowed to wash and her cell was cleaned. But, she said, "he should have known what torture I suffered. It was obvious."

A Central American official confirmed that Honduran military intelligence units receive training from Americans. But "they tell the interrogators to treat prisoners well," he said. "They say that if you mistreat the prisoners they will just tell you what you want to know."

A Honduran human rights group has listed 147 disappearances of people thought to have been detained by groups connected to the military between 1979 and 1984. Human rights activists say they presume these people were killed, but Honduran authorities have suggested that they left the country or assumed new identities.

Caballero said he and other members of Battalion 316 were taken in August 1980 to a facility he believed was in Texas and were trained by Americans for six months in surveillance, interrogation and other intelligence techniques. Later, he said, American and South American advisers continued the training inside Honduras.

Both Murillo and Caballero said that "Mr. Mike" supervised the interrogation of another prisoner, Efraim Duarte, a lawyer seized in Tegucigalpa who later was released on condition that he publicly confess to being a guerrilla.

When Duarte agreed, Caballero said, he was coached on what to say, then was flown to Guatemala where he gave a news conference saying he was a member of a guerrilla group called the Lorenzo Zelaya movement. While she was detained, Murillo said, "I learned that 'Mr. Mike' was coordinating the press conference of Efraim Duarte."

Murillo was released after international human rights groups and the West German government interceded on her behalf. Her mother is German.